

Creating Spiritual and Psychological Resilience



Integrating
Care in
Disaster
Relief Work

In 1972, I got a job going to fires at night for the American Red Cross. New York City was burning in those years. Four fires per 8-hour shift, 12 per day, over 4,000 incidents a year, each of which left at least one family homeless. I drove mostly impoverished families to Red Cross hotels and explained how and where to get more help the next day. Those who emerged from fires with nothing to wear benefited from the 24-hour clothing-and-spiritual care of Adventist Community Services' "retired" Pastor Adam Layman and his disaster boutique on wheels.

For me, the disasters just got bigger and farther away: a major airplane crash near JFK airport; a social club fire that killed 87 immigrants; floods in southern states; refugee camps at the Thai-Cambodian border; earthquakes in Italy, India, El Salvador, and Colombia; famines in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia; war in Angola; genocide in Rwanda; and then back to tornados, hurricanes, wildfires, and terrorism in the United States.

For all their superficial diversity, what made each event a disaster was extreme disruption of body, mind, spirit, family, home, livelihood, and community. Those of us privileged to be the ones who personally bring the comforting resources of the larger community to disaster victims must and do struggle to find ways to be as effective as possible. We are obliged to be as good as we can be.

Our challenge is to know how to comfort the sufferer and to bring him to someone who can provide for his needs. Bishop Stephen P. Bouman, in his book *Grace All Around Us: Embracing God's Promise in Tragedy and Loss*, lists first steps in his outline of disaster response. Show up. Attend first to the ripples on the surface. Accompany the pain on the road. Respond, rescue, reach out, call, pray, touch, embrace, feed, shelter, touch, cry, reassure.

He relates the tender guidance of a South African bishop in New York after 9/11:

In our culture when tragedy happens, we don't all visit at once. We come a few at a time, so that each time the person in sorrow has to answer the door and tell the story again of what happened and shed the tears. As the story is told again and again, healing can begin.

Bouman tells of Kathleen O'Connor's reflection on Lamentations:

To honor pain means to see it, acknowledge its power, and to enter it as fully and squarely as we can, perhaps in a long spiritual process. To do so is ultimately empowering and enables *genuine love, action for others, and true worshipfulness*.

This is hard and necessary, but we have to do this and much more.